Keckley, Elizabeth

DRAWER 2

MRS A LINCOLN - FIRST - ADV

71.2009.085.09429

Mary Todd Lincoln

Elizabeth Keckley (Keckly)

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the

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71.2009.085.04429

LINCOLN LIKED HER.

Story of Elizabeth Keckly, a White House Factotum.

Once She Had Scores of Influential Friends, Now She Lives in Poverty—A Victim of Man's Ingratitude.

Minneapolis Register July 6 1901

[Special Washington Letter.]

ABRAHAM LINCOLN was a good friend of of mine; but he never knew what a good friend of his I was, and have ever been."

Elizabeth Keekly, of No. 1131 Fifteenth street, in this eity, now 80 years of age, was seamstress for Mrs. Lincoln during the eivil war. She was a part of the domestic family, as mueh so as any cabinet minister was a part of the official family. After making the above quoted remark she said:

"I was Mr. Lineoln's friend, am his friend now, and will always proteet his memory, by keeping my mouth closed eoneerning the many things which he unhappily suspected or imagined were going on around him officially and unofficially. I was born a slave, but bought my freedom, and so was under no oligations to Mr. Lineoln for emancipation. But I loved him for his kind manner towards me and for his great act of giving freedom to my raee. I know what liberty is, because I remember what slavery was. When I was a young woman, modest as any young woman, I was stripped to the waist and flogged into insensibility. This was done more than once, simply on the pretext that 'my spirit must be broken.' I know what undeserved suffering was inflieted upon the slaves. Therefore I know what emancipation meant. You who have never suffered eannot understand the full meaning of liberty. I was as good a girl as ever lived, and I wanted to live as good women live; but I was compelled to beeome a mother without marriage. Oh, yes, I know what liberty is, beeause I know what slavery was. Consequently I have almost worshiped Abraham Lineoln. He was as kind and eonsiderate in his treatment of me as he was of any of the white people about the white house. In that he manifested the eonsisteney of his belief that all human beings are ereated equal in the sight of God. He arose every morning as a good man, and he went to bed every night as a God-fearing, Christian man. They say that servants do not reverenee their masters because they know their weaknesses, as the rest of the world cannot know them. But no servant failed to respeet and revere that grand man of God, and man of the eommon people. His life was pure. I eannot say that of all whom I knew in those days.

"I have been honest and not avarieious, or I would not now in my days of feebleness and age be working hard with the needle to earn my daily bread. I never betrayed a seeret in the days when seerets were worth gold, and gold was searee. Nearly all of the great men and women who knew me are now away from earth. The members of the family that I served longest and best are neealess of my age and infirmities and necessities, and unappreeiative of my loyalty; a loyalty whieh I shall continue until my lips are sealed in death. I served the families of Douglas, Harlan, Breekenridge, Lineoln, Chase, and many others who were famous in those days. By all of them, it seems, I am forgotten, else I would not be helpless and penniless in my deelining years."

Referring feelingly to Lincoln, she said: "I know, and I know it well, that so unhappy was that great man,

ELIZABETH KECKLY.

so tired of life and its burdens, that if he eould have expressed an opinion concerning the work of the assassin, he would have said: 'I am glad that it is all over.' He was always ready for death, and I knew him so well that I have always felt that death was welcome to him when it came."

Trembling with emotion this remarkable woman said: "The people whom I personally served seem to have forsaken me, but the government has not overlooked me. My only son was a soldier and died for the cause of liberty. The government gives me a small pension. Thereby I am able to pay my room rent. If I had one single friend who would ask congress to relieve me I know that they would give me a liberal pension beeause God knows I served my eountry while I was in the white house, and I helped Mr. Lincoln in many ways by my loyalty. Moreover, I served Mrs. Lineoln in her darkest days of subsequent poverty. I looked after her interests and helped her to raise money when she was in dire distress. Then I was strong and vigorous. I had no fear of the future. I believed in my ability to take care of myself, and it never occurred to me that I would live to be forgotten and forsaken. I made no provision for old age, for I did not know ingratitude. It was my ignoranee.

"When Mr. Lineoln was shot and carried aeross the street to die in that little house opposite the theater, the first thing that Mrs. Lincoln said was: 'Send for Keekly.' They sent for me at the white house. but did not send to my residenee. Consequently I did not reaeh Mrs. Lineoln until the next morning. She embraeed me and reprovingly said: ''Lizabeth, why did you not eome last night?' Then I explained that I had tried to eome to her, but could not find her; beeause the messengers who would have admitted me were unable to find me. I remained with Mrs. Lineoln until she left the white house. I went to Illinois with her. I never left her until it was impossible for her to keep me with her any longer."

Reverting to her poverty and feebleness, she said: "To-day I had to be trusted for a few spools of thread with which to do my sewing. In the old days I employed upwards of 20 sewing girls. My credit was good for hundreds of dollars' worth of goods. My serviees were sought everywhere, and I was always busy. I still have plenty of work to do, but I am too feeble to do it. I am only able to do enough work to keep me in bread and butter. Just think of it! Lincoln, Douglas, Harland, Seward, Fred Douglass, Bishop Wayman; all gonc—all gone. May be I have lived too long. Not one of my powerful friends is living. If they were, you would not see me living in a rented room, struggling from day to day for food and elothing. If they were living, Wendell Phillips, Fred Douglass, Lloyd Garrison, John B. Gough and others would leeture for my benefit, or send me their eheques. But they are all gone, and here am I, a reminiseence of the glorious days

DRESSING FOR THE RECEPTION.

and glorious men of whom I speak to you. But when I am in most distress, when days are dark, I think of what I often heard Mr. Lineoln say to his wife: 'Don't worry, mother; beeause all things will eome out right. God rules our destinies.' Many and many a time have I heard him say those words, when disasters surrounded the union arms; and also when domestic troubles eame. Yes, that good man's memory helps me, for I reeolleet very many of his sayings, showing faith in God and His goodness."

"I made lots of money when I was young and strong," eontinued the aged woman. "While I was a slave, I performed all of my duties and earned $1,200 additional, with whieh I bought the freedom of myself and my boy; the boy I lost in the eivil war; the boy who would to-day be my comfort and support."

She also made money for a couple of sharpers, in New York, in 1868. She told her story to two newspaper men. They employed stenographers. They published all that she said and a great deal that she did not say, in a book entitled "Behind the Scenes." To-day she said: "I never received a dollar from the publication of that book. They took it all. However, I need not regret that, because they printed many

things which ought not to have been printed; many things which caused heartaches, because they were untrue. The book was printed, and my name was on the title page as the author of everything contained between its lids.

"They told the story of how Mrs. Lincoln tried vainly to sell her expensive and costly wardrobe in New York; but they did not tell it right. I was with Mrs. Lincoln at that time and did my best to help her dispose of her valuable things; but it would do no good now to say anything about the details of that venture. I merely mention it because they made it a part of the book which made money for them, but the publication of which brought me no money, while it made some enemies for me who should have always been my friends.

"I made dresses for Mrs. Lincoln, the ladies of President Andrew Johnson's family, and also for the ladies of the Grant administration. I was famous, in my line, for many years. I was proud; yes, very proud. But fame and pride do not last, as I have found to my sorrow. They don't bring food to an old woman when she is forgotten or when her friends have passed away."

Concerning the public receptions in the white house during the civil war she says: "I dressed Mrs. Lincoln for every levee. I made every stitch of clothing that she wore. I dressed her hair. I put on her skirts and dresses. I fixed her bouquets, saw that her gloves were all right, and remained with her each evening until Mr. Lincoln came for her. My hands were the last to touch her before she took the arm of Mr. Lincoln and went forth to meet the ladies and gentlemen on those great occasions."

Here, in the national capital, in a rented room in a small house, in an obscure neighborhood, friendless and growing gradually weaker and nearer the end of earth, lives this born slave, who bought her own freedom, who became famous among famous women and more famous men, in a wonderful period of the history of the republic. Here she lives alone, and here she soon will die, for not many moons will elapse before the inevitable summons must come to Elizabeth Keckly.

SMITH D. FRY.

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Elizabeth Keckley, a prominent black seamstress, was an intimate friend of the Abraham Lincolns. She recorded her impressions in *Behind the Scenes* —a portrait, mainly, of the President's wife. She is shown, on opposite page, with Mrs. Lincoln, whom she described as a somewhat eccentric individual—yet vital and human.

IT WAS a day in March 1861. An excited crowd had gathered in Washington for the first inauguration of President Abraham Lincoln. In a darkened corridor of the Willard Hotel, a woman stood nervously in the shadow of a doorway, then, gathering her courage, knocked at the door.

A voice inside commanded her to enter, and a lady, somewhat heavy-set, stood before her.

"You are Lizzie Keckley, I believe," the lady greeted.

The visitor said that she was.

"The dressmaker that Mrs. McClean recommended?"

"Yes, madam."

The lady had not time to talk to her visitor, for it appeared that she was extremely busy. But she invited her to visit her again at the White House—"at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, where I shall then be."

The lady, indeed, was Mary Todd Lincoln—destined, that day, to become the first lady of the land. And the visitor who stood, somewhat abashedly, before her was a stately black woman named Elizabeth Keckley—one of the most sought-after seamstresses in all of the capital.

The women, despite this undistinguished meeting, were soon to develop an intimate friendship—one that survived Mrs. Lincoln's eclipse. Mrs. Keckley would call almost daily at the White House, both in the role of high-priced seamstress and, ever increasingly, that of a friend. She would even be visited at her flat by Mrs. Lincoln, although "I never approved of such ladies . . . coming to my rooms." Indeed, in the days after her husband's murder, Mrs. Lincoln was asked, by those attending her, if there was any one person she wished to be with her. Her reply: "Elizabeth Keckley."

Mrs. Keckley, a largely self-taught woman, has recorded the story in *Behind the Scenes,* a book she wrote after the death of the President and which recently was revived (by Arno Press and the New York Times) as part of a series, *The American Negro: His History and Literature.* Though somewhat courtly, in the style of the day, the account often reads like a modern exposé—with startling glimpses into the lives of the Lincolns, and compelling assessments of other figures of the day.

The principal character is Mrs. Lincoln, whom the author calls, in tones of affection, "the most peculiarly constituted woman" she

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"Mrs. Lincoln's love for her husband," wrote Mrs. Keckley, "sometimes prompted her to act very strangely. She was extremely jealous of him, and if a lady desired to court her displeasure, she could select no surer way . . . than to pay marked attention to the President . . ."

Lincoln, for his part, seems to have found this amusing—or on many occasions pretended he did. The following dialogue seems to have been typical:

"If it was a reception for which they were dressing, he would come into her room to conduct her downstairs, and, while pulling on his gloves ask, with a merry twinkle in his eye:

" 'Well, mother, who must I talk to tonight—shall it be Mrs. D.?'

" 'That deceitful woman! No, you shall not listen to her flattery.'

" 'Well, then, what do you say to Miss C.? She is too young and handsome to practice deceit.'

" 'Young and handsome, you call her! You should not judge beauty for me. No, she is in league with Mrs. D., and you shall not talk to her.'

" 'Well, mother, I must talk to someone. Is there any one that you do not object to?' trying to button his glove, with a mock expression of gravity.

" 'I don't know as it is necessary that you should talk to anybody in particular. You know very well, Mr. Lincoln, that I do not

VON HESS FOUNDATION, WRIGHT'S FERRY MANSION

Susanna Wright (1697-1784)

Described in a 1911 article in *Harper's Weekly Advertiser* as "the original New Woman of America," Wright was born in Lancashire, England, and came to Pennsylvania with her Quaker family in 1714. After living near Philadelphia for 12 years, she purchased a hundred acres of land at Columbia, along the Susquehanna River, where she established a ferry that came to be known as "the gateway to the West." She farmed the land, growing hops, hemp, and indigo for sale and was one of the first to try to establish a silk industry in Pennsylvania. (Benjamin Franklin took sixty yards of Wright's silk as a gift to Queen Charlotte.) Proficient in languages, she was a noted writer and was one of the first to express in her poetry the idea that men and women should be considered as equals.

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907)

Dressmaker and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley was born into slavery in Virginia and, although she suffered brutal treatment at the hands of earlier owners, she was well treated by the last family with whom she lived as a slave. While still a slave, she became a dressmaker in St. Louis, and in 1855 was able to buy freedom for herself and her son. Five years later, she moved to Baltimore and then Washington, D.C., where her sewing talents brought her to the attention of the First Lady. Keckley soon became dressmaker to Mrs. Lincoln, and the two women forged a close friendship that lasted until an estrangement following the 1868 publication of Keckley's autobiography. In 1892, Keckley moved to Xenia, Ohio, where she served on the faculty of Wilberforce University as a sewing instructor for six years. Returning to Washington, she continued to sew until her eyesight deteriorated; she then retired to the Home for Destitute Women and Children that she had helped to establish.

THE LINCOLN MUSEUM

A Black Woman's View Of MARY TODD LINCOLN

Friend and seamstress of President's wife wrote 'scandalous' book

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The principal character is Mrs. Lincoln, whom the author calls, in tones of affection, "the most peculiarly constituted woman" she ever met. Eccentric (though childishly, endearingly so), she more than lived up to her historical reputation as one of the more interesting and complex of the nation's first ladies.

Rather like a more recent occupant of the mansion (assuming, of course, that accounts are true), in her habits she emerged as a paradox: a woman who threw away thousands on clothes then economized, ludicrously, on other details of her household (upon entering the White House, for example, she promptly reduced the servant staff). She was capable, too, of abiding hatreds—yet her devotion to someone she liked could be touching. But the most compelling side of Mrs. Lincoln was her jealousy. She kept a vigilant eye on the President's behavior. And if anything created friction among the Lincolns, it was this all-too-familiar side of their marriage.

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Lincoln's wife was extremely jealous and referred to her husband's friends as "flatterers." Above, she watches at White House ball as President—in somewhat dashing posture—presses the hand of one of the attractive visitors.

MARY TODD LINCOLN *Continued*

approve of your flirtations with silly women . . ."

The President is pictured as a guileless individual whose personal candor often prompted him to trust others. His wife, by contrast, was "somewhat suspicious," and spared no one —not even officials—her scrutiny. She referred to Ulysses S. Grant as a "butcher," who "generally manages to claim a victory" but "loses two men to the enemy's one." Gen. George B. McClellan, when commander-in-chief, was the idol of the soldiers, universally beloved. "He is a humbug,' remarked Mrs. Lincoln one day in my presence."

Andrew Johnson, in her opinion, was a "demagogue," while Secretary of State William S. Seward could not, insisted Mrs. Lincoln, be trusted. (Charles Sumner seemed to have earned her respect, and she was a vocal admirer of Frederick Douglass.)

Mrs. Lincoln was also an extravagant woman, amassing debts, before she departed from the White House, of somewhere in the neighborhood of $70,000. She was, as a consequence, "extremely anxious," lest the expenses she incurred be the ruin of the family.

"What do you think of the election?" she would query, eyeing her seamstress with impish alarm.

"'I think that Mr. Lincoln will remain in the White House four years longer . . .'

"'What makes you think so?' Somehow I have learned to fear that he will be defeated.'

"'Because he has been tried, and has proved faithful to the best interests of the country . . . He represents a principle, and to maintain this principle the loyal people of the loyal States will vote for him, even if he had no merits to commend him.'

"'Your view is a plausible one, Lizabeth, and your confidence gives me new hope. If he should be defeated, I do not know what will become of us all . . . There is more at stake in this election than he dreams of.'

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MARY TODD LINCOLN *Continued*

"'What can you mean, Mrs. Lincoln. I do not comprehend.'

"'Simply this. I have contracted large debts, of which he knows nothing, and which he will be unable to pay if he is defeated.'"

Vignettes like these were obviously sensational—and the Lincoln family, understandably, was incensed. The book was denounced as "scandal and trash," and all available copies were bought up and destroyed. Robert, elder of the Lincoln sons, was most vocal, but even Mrs. Lincoln, reportedly, was distressed. Although the author insisted that her friend "knew it all," there is no indication that their relationship survived.

Yet the book, for all its scandalous overtones, was something more than an exposé. It was, historically, a backstage glimpse at one of the most turbulent periods in American history. It was also, in passing, an autobiography—the astonishing story of a former slave who moved, somewhat as an "equal," in the highest circles of her time.

Born a slave somewhere in Virginia, Elizabeth Keckley escaped few of the traumas that scarred the lives of other black people. She was, she remembers, only four years old when she suffered (for neglecting a baby) her first lashing. Shortly thereafter, her father was sold—"and the announcement fell (among the household) like a thunderbolt." When only a teen, she bore a son, and of the father, a white man, she later wrote: "I spare the world his name . . . I do not care to dwell" on the subject.

Elizabeth, as a woman, then moved to St. Louis, where she married (she was later divorced) and gained her freedom. This emancipation was a voluntary one, of the sort often cited by apologists for slavery in emphasizing its occasional "emotional" ties. (Never a militant, nor yet a conservative, she preserved a lifelong attachment to her "family," and even visited them, as a guest, when they returned to Virginia.)

Mrs. Keckley seems to have decided quite early on a career as seamstress for the nobility of the capital. "Ever since arriving in Washington," she wrote, "I had a great desire to work for the ladies of the White House, and to accomplish this end I was ready to make almost any sacrifice consistent with propriety."

As a stepping stone in the pursuit of this goal, she presented herself to Mrs. Jefferson Davis, whose husband (then a senator) later led the Confederacy. As seamstress, she moved quite freely in the household, and recalls that the prospect of war was often discussed.

Indeed, the secession *was* rapidly nearing, and the Davises were soon to move to Montgomery. Before leaving, they asked Mrs. Keckley to accompany them. She refused, and later recorded in her book:

"I thought over the question much, and the more I thought, the less inclined I felt to accept the proposition so kindly made by Mrs. Davis. I knew the North to be strong, and believed that the people would fight for the flag that they pretended to venerate so highly."

Mrs. Keckley's ensuing connections at the White House ended, abruptly, one day in April, when "lightning flashed the most appalling news . . . The President has been murdered.'"

She was summoned, as soon as they could find her, to the White House, where she found Mrs. Lincoln "tossing uneasily about upon a bed. The room was darkened, and the only person in it beside the widow . . . was Mrs. Secretary Welles, who had spent the night with her. Bowing to Mrs. Welles, I went to the bedside.

"'Why did you not come to me last night, Elizabeth—I sent for you?' Mrs. Lincoln asked in a low whisper.

"'I did try to come to you, but I could not find you,' I answered, as I laid my hand upon her hot brow."

She later learned from the wife of the secretary "that when Mrs. Lincoln had partially recovered from the first shock . . . Mrs. Welles asked:

"'Is there no one, Mrs. Lincoln, that you desire to have with you in this terrible affliction?'

"'Yes, send for Elizabeth Keckley. I want her just as soon as she can be brought here.'"

Indeed, in the tragic days that followed, Mrs. Lincoln "denied

Continued on Page 106

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MARY TODD LINCOLN *Continued*

admittance to almost every one, and I was her only companion, except for her children . . ."

As a result, perhaps, of the immensity of the tragedy, the oddness for which Mrs. Lincoln was known (kept somewhat in check while the President lived) now expressed itself in earnest. She believed (and told him so to his face) that the guard who attended them the night of the shooting had somehow been connected with the President's murder. She even suggested, on at least one occasion, that Andrew Johnson had been a part of the "conspiracy." But her biggest problem was her sudden destitution, and it was in this state that she returned to Chicago.

Mrs. Keckley consented to accompany her there—and the two of them lived with the Lincolns' two sons in virtual poverty just outside the city.

"What a dreary place, Lizzie," Mrs. Lincoln once remarked, contemplating, with horror, her new accommodations. "Ah! what a sad change has come to us all."

Eventually, Mrs. Keckley returned to the capital. But the friendship she had cultivated with Mrs. Lincoln endured. She was even a party, though an unwilling one, to the rather clumsy attempt by Mrs. Lincoln to market certain items of her personal wardrobe.

It was, from the start, an ill-conceived project, as the author herself was willing to admit. But here was the widow of Abraham Lincoln, "the man who had done so much for my race, and I could refuse to do nothing for her . . ."

The women met, incognito, in New York, and set about the

The splendor and charm of White House society were not accessible to Elizabeth Keckley. But she did design the gowns of many of the guests—including Mesdames Stephen Douglas, Jefferson Davis and others.

task of marketing their wares. Blunder followed blunder, however, and the press was soon alerted to their identity. Thus, what at first was to be a secret transaction prompted nationwide headlines—and Mrs. Lincoln's humiliation.

(The incident, in exposing her poverty, revealed another side of Mrs. Lincoln's personality. Among the many groups which organized to help her was a syndicate of blacks headed by Frederick Douglass. Here was a man she professed to admire, whom she had even, according to the book, made efforts to meet. Yet on learning of the project, she reportedly was mortified—declining to accept aid "from colored people.")

The profile of Mrs. Lincoln, then, is complete. But what sort of person was the author herself. How did she regard her curious position at a time when most black people were in misery?

She was, as stated earlier, no militant. She never abandoned her loyalties to the South; and it is often quite easy, in reading opinions, to forget, in fact, that the author was black. Yet she never, for all her welcome at the White House, completely forgot the plight of her people—and the outrages—physical and psychological—which they suffered.

For many years, she headed the Contraband Relief Agency, an organization to assist former slaves in adjusting to the unfamiliar world of the North. This must have occupied much of her time, but nowhere in the book does she complain of the demands. ("The colored people," she explained, "are wedded to associations, and when you destroy these you destroy half the happiness of their lives.")

She was also aware of the many subtleties of racism—its inconsistencies, its often maddening blindnesses.

In this regard, she recalled an incident in Chicago. Tad, the younger of the Lincolns' surviving sons, failed, one afternoon, in attempting to master a spelling lesson. Realizing this, he made a joke of the affair—and the family indulged him, shrugging it off.

"Whenever I think of this incident," wrote Elizabeth Keckley, "I am tempted to laugh. And then it occurs to me that had Tad been a negro boy, not the son of a President, and so difficult to instruct, he would have been called thick-skulled, and would have been held up as an example of the inferiority of (my) race. I know many full negro boys, able to read and write, who are not older than Tad Lincoln was when he persisted that A-p-e spelt monkey. Do not imagine that I desire to reflect upon the intellect of little Tad. Not at all; he is a bright boy, a son that will do honor to the genius and greatness of his father; I only mean to say that some incidents are about as damaging to one side of the question as to the other. If a colored boy appears dull, so does a white boy sometimes; and if a whole race is judged by a single example of apparent dullness, another race should be judged by a similar example."

Mrs. Keckley, following the publication of her book, slipped, it appears, into virtual obscurity. Little is known of her later years prior to her death in 1907. It was even claimed by whimsical journalists that no such person indeed existed—that the book was "ghosted" by a professional writer who needed an "insider" to give credence to the work. (She was, as it happens, apparently given some help by a writer of the day named James Redpath.)

Her journal, predictably, created a sensation (though a short-lived one, owing to the haste of its destruction). Reaction was both to the subject of the journal and, more intensely, to its author's race. (Typical of this was the publication of a parody, *Behind the Seams*, by "an illiterate black woman," "Betsy Kickley.")

For her part, Elizabeth seemed to expect some commotion. In a preface to her book (an apology, actually, for the fiasco in New York), she explained her motivations as follows: "In writing as I have done, I am well aware that I have invited criticism . . . (But) if the world is to judge (Mrs. Lincoln) as I have judged her, it must be introduced to the secret history of her transactions . . ."

And besides, she concluded—a bit more generally than she had intended: "I have written nothing that can place Mrs. Lincoln in a worse light before the world than the light in which she now stands . . ."

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Susanna Wright (1697-1784)

Described in a 1911 article in *Harper's Weekly Advertiser* as "the original New Woman of America," Wright was born in Lancashire, England, and came to Pennsylvania with her Quaker family in 1714. After living near Philadelphia for 12 years, she purchased a hundred acres of land at Columbia, along the Susquehanna River, where she established a ferry that came to be known as "the gateway to the West." She farmed the land, growing hops, hemp, and indigo for sale and was one of the first to try to establish a silk industry in Pennsylvania. (Benjamin Franklin took sixty yards of Wright's silk as a gift to Queen Charlotte.) Proficient in languages, she was a noted writer and was one of the first to express in her poetry the idea that men and women should be considered as equals.

Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley (1818-1907)

Dressmaker and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley was born into slavery in Virginia and, although she suffered brutal treatment at the hands of earlier owners, she was well treated by the last family with whom she lived as a slave. While still a slave, she became a dressmaker in St. Louis, and in 1855 was able to buy freedom for herself and her son. Five years later, she moved to Baltimore and then Washington, D.C., where her sewing talents brought her to the attention of the First Lady. Keckley soon became dressmaker to Mrs. Lincoln, and the two women forged a close friendship that lasted until an estrangement following the 1868 publication of Keckley's autobiography. In 1892, Keckley moved to Xenia, Ohio, where she served on the faculty of Wilberforce University as a sewing instructor for six years. Returning to Washington, she continued to sew until her eyesight deteriorated; she then retired to the Home for Destitute Women and Children that she had helped to establish.

THE LINCOLN MUSEUM

Gown Enables Student to Have a Ball

American Studies major Lori Kauffman '99 spent fall semester this year at the Smithsonian Institution studying a dress made by African-American dressmaker and former slave Elizabeth Keckley for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln. In February, Kauffman returned to Washington to share the complexity of her research with an audience of more than 100. As a featured speaker in the conversation series "Looking American" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Kauffman spoke in conjunction with her former advisor at the Smithsonian, Claudia Brush Kidwell. With the largest turnout thus far in the series, Kauffman and Kidwell used visual aids from the Smithsonian's costume collection during the talk, including Mary Todd Lincoln's inaugural ball gown, made by Keckley. "I spent so long working on it," says Kauffman. "It was great being able to share what I'd learned and to have an outlet for all my research." The enthusiastic crowd made their interest clear to the speakers after the talk. "People asked me where they could get copies of my publications," says Kauffman. "It was such an ego booster."

Smith College
March 26, 1998

War Criminal *(Continued from page 3)* has provided the following critique of the book: *"Lincoln on Trial* is excellent in every respect: writing, content, and relevance. With America at war in many places involving civilians, this study is a primer on the laws of war and the treatment of noncombatants who are subsumed by armed conflict when the dogs of war are unleashed."

Burrus M. Carnahan, a professorial lecturer at George Washington University Law School and foreign affairs officer in the U.S. Department of State, is the author of *Act of Justice: Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the Law of War*. A former President of the Lincoln Group, he is the author of the Group's Bicentennial project, *The Guide to Lincoln Sites In and Around Washington, DC.*

Remembering Elizabeth Keckly

Lincoln Group member Laurie Verge has informed us of the current effort to mark the grave of Elizabeth Keckly, seamstress and confident of Mary Todd Lincoln. Students of Lincoln know Ms. Keckly's story from her own book *Behind the Scenes*, and from Jennifer Fleischner's biography, *Mrs. Lincoln and Mrs. Keckley.*

Mrs. Keckly lived until 1907 and was buried in Columbian Harmony Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Her grave was marked with a simple stone. In the mid-1950s, the cemetery was bankrupt and the property was sold to developers, who agreed to move the 37,000 graves (many of them African American Civil War veterans, some Medal of Honor winners), but not the grave markers. Mrs. Keckly's remains went to New Harmony Cemetery in Landover, Maryland. The records were "lost" for many years.

Mr. Richard Smyth of Pennsylvania contacted the Surratt House Museum last year following a program presented by that site on Elizabeth Keckly. Mr. Smyth pursues a pastime of photographing and documenting burial sites of historical figures. He explained that current cemetery management at New Harmony had located her records and had spelled out the location in section, lot, and grave number. He asked for assistance in placing a marker on Elizabeth's grave. The Surratt Society agreed to assist with the project. The Lincoln Forum agreed to

The Lincoln Group has made a donation to the effort to mark the gravesite of Elizabeth Keckly.

co-sponsor the $5000 initiative with the Surratt Society. The Lincoln Group officers approved a donation to the cause. New Harmony Cemetery has agreed to pay one-half the cost for a high grade marker with name, birth/death dates, photo, and a paragraph of text as well as a sign near the entrance to the cemetery indicating that Mrs. Keckly lies within. However, additional funds are still needed to finance the project. Funds contributed over the amount needed for the marker itself will be used for a perpetual care agreement for the gravesite. The anticipated date for the unveiling ceremony is February 2010.

If you wish to make a donation, please make your check payable to "Surratt Society" and add "Keckly Fund" in the memo section. Mail to: Laurie Verge, Director, Surratt House Museum, P.O. Box 427, Clinton, MD 20735. All donations will be acknowledged for tax purposes.

Archives Displays Proclamation

The National Archives will feature a special display of the milestone Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation from Thursday, January 14, through Monday, January 18, 2010 in the East Rotunda Gallery in downtown Washington.

Lincoln seamstress Elizabeth Keckly given Largo grave marker

By Liz Skalski

washingtonpost.com

Years after slave Elizabeth Hobbs Keckly bought freedom for herself and her son, she earned a place in American history for becoming dressmaker to Mary Todd Lincoln and eventually writing a book on the Lincolns' years in the White House.

But for nearly 50 years, her remains were buried in an unmarked grave at Largo's National Harmony Memorial Park.

"No one knew she was there. The best that anyone ever knew was that her remains were put at a mass grave at Harmony," said Richard Smyth, 59, of Milford, Pa., who spent two years researching where Keckly was buried and worked with county groups to fund a grave marker. "It began as a journey, and now the journey was completed."

On May 26, 103 years after Keckly's death in 1907, her memory and historical significance were honored with a ceremony to dedicate and lay a bronze grave marker on a granite slab detailing her role in presidential history -- a ceremony attended by the self-described amateur historian, along with the Clinton and Washington, D.C.-area volunteers who helped make the day possible.

Keckly, who was born into slavery in Petersburg, Va., eventually bought freedom for herself and her son and used her sewing skills to become the designer and seamstress for President Abraham Lincoln's wife. Keckly died at age 89 on May 26, 1907, said Laurie Verge, museum director for the Surratt House Museum in Clinton, which focuses on the history of the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination.

Keckly owned her own dress shop in the District. She was recommended as a seamstress to Mary Todd Lincoln by other society ladies, including the wives of Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, Verge said.

In 1868, Keckly wrote a book, "Behind the Scenes," about her relationship with the Lincoln family, Verge said. The book, which upset Mary Lincoln and ultimately caused the two women to end their relationship, has provided historians an account of life inside in Lincoln White House.

After her death in 1907, Keckly was buried in the Columbian Harmony Cemetery in the District. In the 1950s, that cemetery was bought by developers and many of the 37,000 bodies buried there, including Keckly's, were moved to the Largo cemetery -- though the grave markers were not, Verge said.

Keckly has no living relatives or descendants -- her only son died during the Civil War -- and historians believed Keckly's grave could not be located, Verge said.

Then, in 2009, Smyth, a real estate agent who said he has been interested in the Civil War and Lincoln's assassination for about 30 years, began research on historical graves and stumbled upon information on Keckly's.

The cemetery's ledgers and books located the plot and section where Keckly was buried, Smyth said.

Smyth said he has worked with National Harmony Memorial Park and The Surratt Society -- the 1,500-member volunteer associate of the museum that sponsored the project -- over the past two years to get the grave marker.

"It's a lot of the history that you don't find in the history books, and it's still out there and kind of exciting," Smyth said.

Smyth said the marker, which cost about $5,000, was paid for solely by donations from project sponsors and contributors, including National Harmony Memorial Park; The Surratt Society; Black Women United For Action, a Virginia-based organization that works to improve the lives of women; The Lincoln Forum, a national organization that works to learn about and preserve the memory of Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War; and the Ford's Theatre Society.

Sandra Walia, a research librarian at the Surratt House Museum, said she learned about Keckly when she portrayed her for 10 years in Ford's Theatre's annual black history program.

"I didn't know much about her until I portrayed her," said Walia, who composed Keckly's grave marker. "I think [the grave marker] is long overdue."

Walia said she worked with Smyth over the past two years to research the grave.

Sheila Coates, of Virginia, the founder and president of Black Women United for Action, said Keckly is an inspiration.

"She gives me inspiration, encouragement," Coates said. "I'm so thankful we could be a part of it."

Sheila Coates, left, Edna Medford, Sandra Walia, Thomas Buckingham and Cecelia Logan unveil a grave marker last week at National Harmony Memorial Park in Largo for dressmaker Elizabeth Keckly. (Christopher Anderson/the Gazette)

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Dinwiddie slave climbed to confidante in Lincoln White House

By Vanessa Remmers (Staff Writer) progress-index.com

DINWIDDIE - Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley never thought she would return to her Dinwiddie home, but the final year of the Civil War found the former slave walking on familiar ground.

This time, she would stand as a free woman alongside the president history would remember for securing the end of slavery.

Even though Keckley was born a slave at Dinwiddie Court House in 1818, she would use her talent for needlework and a personal strength fortified from the hardships of her childhood to rise to one of the most unique - and powerful - places in society for her time: Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker and personal confidante.

Mary Todd Lincoln would later describe Keckley as her "best living friend."

Frances Pollard, a historian with the Virginia Historical Society, said that the friendship between the two very different women was forged in their shared experience as societal outcasts.

"I think they were in a way both in the margins of society. Society didn't accept Mrs. Lincoln, and Keckley was a black woman," Pollard said. "I don't think Mary Todd Lincoln had many friends. In a master-slave society, they were as close as two women could be."

Keckley met Mary Todd Lincoln through a mutual friend, Margaret Mclean, who knew that Mary Lincoln was looking for a dressmaker.

On March 4, 1861 - the same day that Abraham Lincoln took his first oath of office as the president of the United States - his wife would be meeting her future dressmaker and friend.

"Keckley was a woman of great presence and intelligence, tall (some say over six feet), with twinkling eyes, a radiant smile, light skin, straight black hair, and impeccable manners. Mary Lincoln not only liked the dresses designed to show off her neck and arms but also found Keckley an entertaining companion and soothing influence," American National Biography records state.

In her autobiography, "Behind the Scenes, or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House," Keckley said her mother, Agnes Hobbs, taught her how to sew, weave and do needlework.

It would be this skill that would eventually allow Keckley to purchase both her freedom and her son's from the family of Col. Armistead Burwell. Keckley would later claim that Burwell was not only her master, but also her father.

"Needlework skills became the course of her salvation. Needlework was a common skill for plantation slaves, but she was more skilled than those around her," Pollard said.

It would be an uphill battle before Keckley was able to purchase her freedom. Keckley was separated from her mother at 14 when Col. Burwell forced Keckley to live with his eldest son, Robert Burwell. While working for the young Burwell in North Carolina, Keckley said she was impregnated by Alexander M. Kirkland, a local white businessman.

The physical and sexual abuse that Keckley suffered in North Carolina came to an end when she was "loaned" to Ann Garland, Col. Burwell's daughter, around 1840. Ann and her husband, Hugh Garland, relocated often, first to Petersburg and then St. Louis, as Hugh attempted to fix his economic troubles.

It would be Keckley's reputation as a skilled seamstress that would keep the family afloat.

"With my needle, I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen people for five years," Keckley wrote. "While I was working so hard to keep others in comparative comfort, and move in those circles of society to which their birth gave them entrance, the thought often came to me whether I was really worth my salt or not. And then perhaps the lips curled into a bitter sneer."

Keckley's bitter sneer became a steely determination to meet the $1,200 price the Burwells named for her and her son's freedom.

"A wrong was inflicted upon me, a cruel custom deprived me of my liberty, and since I was robbed of my dearest right, I would not have been human had I not rebelled against the robbery," Keckley wrote in her autobiography.

Her goal was accomplished thanks to the business of the city's lady patrons. By 1855, a free Keckley left behind her brief marriage to James Keckley and set her sights on the nation's capital, which would soon be embroiled in a battle of its own.

The former slave would witness the gathering storms of the Civil War while working for Jefferson Davis' wife, Varina Davis.

By 1860, when war seemed imminent, Varina Davis invited Keckley to join her in the South. Keckley refused, setting her on a path that, a year later, would bring her face-to-face with Mary Lincoln.

"I preferred to cast my lot among the people of the North," Keckley wrote. "I parted with Mrs. Davis kindly, half promising to join her in the South if further deliberation should induce me to change my views."

That the wife of the future president of the Confederate States of America would be wearing similar dresses to that of Mary Todd Lincoln is now considered one of the many pieces of irony of Keckley's life.

Keckley would eventually revisit her hometown with the Lincolns, but the scenes of her childhood would seem a distant memory against the images of the 1865 South.

The Lincolns made their last visit to Petersburg area in the final year of the Civil War, just weeks before President Lincoln's assassination.

According to the Petersburg Area Regional Tourism records, in the 20 years that Keckley had been gone from Petersburg, both the city's freed black population and enslaved population had increased. Many of those Keckley would have known had likely either died or been sold.

The Virginia plantations were the only familiar thing for Keckley about Richmond, which had become a ghost town. Keckley recalls in her memoir how scattered papers blew in deserted streets outside of a quiet, vacant Capitol building.

The independent businesswoman sat in the same seat that Jefferson Davis, the husband of her former patron, had once occupied. Picking up one of the scattered papers, she read a resolution prohibiting all colored people from entering the state of Virginia.

"I wondered, now that Virginia had fallen, and Virginia had been restored to the clustering stars of the Union, if the people would come together in the bonds of peace," Keckley wrote.

The first year of the war had cost Keckley her son, but had also only seemed to strengthen her resolve to fight against the long-term effects of slavery.

"If the white people can give festivals to raise funds for the relief of suffering soldiers, why should not the well-to-do colored people go to work to do something for the benefit of the suffering blacks?" Keckley wrote.

While there is no historical evidence that Keckley's position in the White House during the Civil War had any tangible effect on Abraham Lincoln's decisions, Keckley did her own part in the fight against slavery. She founded

the Contraband Relief Association in 1862, using her connections with the White House, as well as with Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, to help the relief association provide newly-freed slaves with necessities.

"In D.C., you had contraband slaves who were flooding in there, but they were destitute, and needed shelter and food," Pollard said.

According to Pollard, Mary Lincoln contributed blankets and money to the association. The four years of the war had only strengthened the bond between the two women, who had lost their sons one year apart. Keckley describes in her memoir how the stately President Lincoln bent over with grief at the sight of his son's dead body.

Details such as these would later be used to vilify both Keckley's memoir and Mary Lincoln herself.

"It was roundly criticized and did not sell well. People thought it was an invasion of privacy," Keckley said.

Keckley wrote the book, one of the first political memoirs in American history, in the hopes of improving public opinion about the former first lady selling her clothes in New York for income.

"I have been her confidante, and if evil charges are laid at her door, they must also be laid at mine, since I have been a party to all of her movements," Keckley wrote.

Yet the unedited letters in the appendix of the book, as well as the domestic portrayal of the Lincoln household, would have the opposite result. After the book was published in 1868, Mary Lincoln would never again speak to Keckley.

The Dinwiddie native never returned to the South, and eventually died in 1907 while living at the National Center for Destitute Colored Women and Children, an organization that, according to American National Biography, stemmed directly from Keckley's relief organization.

"She was a composed, dignified woman who had really had quite an extraordinary life. She was quite a force. She deserves a movie of her own," Pollard said.

- Vanessa Remmers may be reached at 804-722-5155 or vremmers@progress-index.com.

Original - Please RETURN THIS -

NOTE:- (From the Lincoln Collection of Dr. J.E.Washington)

Statement of (Mrs.) Alberta Elizabeth Lewis-Savoy
Born - June 10th, 1863 at premises No. 388 Twelfth Street, Northwest (now knows as premises #1017 - 12th St.,N.W.)

*****

Mrs. Elizabeth Keckley lived with my parents Mr. and Mrs. WALKER LEWIS at 388 12th Street, Northwest, this city on three different occasions.

She carried on an extensive dressmaking business and taught young girls how to sew, fit and design pretty dresses. She had a figure on which she draped the dresses. I forget the name she called the figure; but she taught the S. T. TAYLOR system of cutting and she set out from her dressmaking establishment finished dressmakers. Many seamstresses owe their success in life to the thorough, painstaking instruction given by Mrs. Keckley.

She moved with our family to 1752 Pea Street, Northwest; but she did NOT carry on the dressmaking business there; although she did a little sewing. At this time I was about fifteen years of age. Mrs. Keckley lived in the 1100 block of 17th Street; but I cannot recall where she went from there.

If I were fifteen years of age when Mrs. Keckley moved to our home at 1752 Pea Street, N. W., it would be 1878 A. D., and she did not have any helpers at that time. While living with us on Pea Street, Mrs. Keckley gave me a piece of black thread and told me that it came off of a dress of Mrs. Abraham Lincoln's; and she also gave me a little piece of Valenciennes lace that came off of a white linen cambric dress worn by her.

Mrs. Keckley was a member of the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church then situated in the 900 block of Fifteenth Street, N. W.,and was well acquainted with Henry Highland Garnet, Dr. Abbott of Toronto, Canada, the Slades of Washington, D. C. Representative Alonzo Jacob Ransier of Charleston, South Carolina, Mr. Wilson of the Freedmen's Bank and a Mr. & Mrs. Emerson of England. She had numerous other friends and acquaintances whose names I do not recall.

Mrs. Keckley was always careful of her associates - a woman of refinement and culture, and I could well afford to say "to the manner born". She carried herself gracefully and well and was well poised and had a very striking personality and pleasing personality.

She was very particular and exacting and insisted that the young girls whom she was teaching to sew in her establishment sit erect at all times; and never allowed them to pin their sewing on their knees. This, of course, was to prevent a stooping posture.

At the time I visited her in the Eighth Street Home, she was in failing health. Her funeral was preached by the Rev. Francis Grimke of the Fifteenth Street Pres. Church and she is buried in Harmony Cemetery, Washington, D. C.

Respectfully submitted,

Alberta Elizabeth Lewis Savoy.

Note:-Mrs. Keckley was living at our house 1017-12th St., n. w., in 1874...

*****

A.E.L.S.

Note;- For verification, see Behind the Scenes by Elizabeth Keckley, Page 182.